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**CLASSICS IN THE HISTORY OF LIBERTY**

**DAVID HUME, *A NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION* (1757)**

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**EDITION USED**

*The Natural History of Religion*. By David Hume. With and Introduction by John M. Robertson (London: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1889).

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## INTRODUCTION.

IN the only cheap edition of Hume's "Essays and Treatises" now in the British market, the essays on "Miracles" and "A Particular Providence and a Future State" have been omitted, while the "Natural History of Religion" has been extensively mutilated, at least thirteen separate passages, some of them lengthy, being suppressed in the interests of the popular religion. This edition, now or lately published by Messrs. Ward, Lock, and Tyler, was first issued by Messrs. A. Murray and Son; and its mutilated character is the more scandalous, seeing that the title-page bears the statement: "A careful reprint of the two vols. octavo edition". If there ever was a two-volume edition of a similarly curtailed kind, it is certainly not generally known; and the effect of the publishers' announcement is simply to deceive the reading public, who are led to suppose that the book offered them corresponds to the various complete two-volume editions of the latter part of last century and the earlier part of this. The facts that for about fifty years there were no fresh issues of the "Essays", widely sold as they had been in Hume's own day and the next generation, and that the only recent edition at a moderate price is thus piously fraudulent, are significant of the nature of our social and intellectual history since the French Revolution.

A cheap and complete edition of Hume will doubtless ere long be forthcoming.

Meantime, there being already separate issues of the essay on "Miracles"<sup>1</sup>, it has seemed desirable to similarly reprint the "Natural History of Religion", one of Hume's most important treatises; the more so as so many readers have been led to suppose they had perused the whole of it in the mutilated edition above mentioned. It does not save the credit of the pious publisher that his excisions fail to make the treatise innocuous to his faith; and many readers may have found the pruned version very sufficient for its purpose. To every independent student, however, the mutilation of a text in the interests of orthodoxy is an intolerable presumption; and for such students the present issue is intended. Thanks to the careful edition of Hume's works by Messrs. Green and Grose, which has been followed in this matter, it gives the many classical references in full, and according to the standard texts.

"The Natural History of Religion" was published by Hume at the beginning of 1757, after his reputation had been established by his earlier "Essays" and the first two volumes of his "History of England". It is the one of his works which most explicitly asserts his Deism; but on account of its rationalistic treatment of concrete religion in general, which only nominally spared Christianity, it was that which first brought upon him much theological odium in England. The pugnacious Warburton saw a copy before publication, and wrote to Millar, who was Hume's publisher as well as his own, urging its suppression. "Sir", he characteristically begins, "I suppose you would be glad to know what sort of book it is which you are to publish with Hume's name and yours to it. . . . He is establishing Atheism; and in one single line of a long essay professes to believe Christianity. . . . You have often told me of this man's moral virtues. He may have

many, for aught I know; but let me observe to you there are vices of the *mind* as well as of the *body*; and I think a wickeder mind, and more obstinately bent on public mischief, I never knew."<sup>1</sup> The "establishing Atheism" was perhaps truer in a way than the Christian critic supposed; though nothing could be more distinct than Hume's preliminary and repeated profession of Theism, and nothing more unscrupulous than Warburton's statement.

The publisher being undeterred, other steps were taken. Of the reception of "The Natural History of Religion", Hume says in "My Own Life": "Its first entry was rather obscure, except only that Dr. Hurd wrote a pamphlet against it, with all the illiberal petulance, arrogance, and scurrility, which distinguish the Warburtonian school. This pamphlet gave me some consolation for the otherwise indifferent reception of my performance." On this Hurd, with theological accuracy, writes: "He was much hurt, and no wonder, by so lively an attack upon him, and could not help confessing it in what he calls his 'Own Life' ". The pamphlet was really in the main the work of Warburton, as we learn from Hurd, who, as Messrs. Green and Grose observe, "tells the narrative of the pious fraud with great simplicity". Warburton had written certain characteristic observations on the margins of his copy of Hume, which Hurd thought worth printing; and the lion handed the copy over to his jackal, who, after slightly manipulating the material, published it anonymously as "Remarks on Mr. David Hume's Essay on 'The Natural History of Religion': Addressed to the Rev. Dr. Warburton". Hurd thought the "thin disguise" sufficed to take-in everybody, Hume included; but Hume actually wrote to his publisher soon after the issue: "I am positively assured that Dr. Warburton wrote that letter to himself, which you sent me; and indeed the style discovers him sufficiently".<sup>1</sup> He indicated a readiness to discuss the "principal topics of my philosophy" with Warburton; but thought the "Remarks" not worth answering; as they certainly were not. Warburton, of course, was incapable of efficient controversy with Hume on philosophical questions; and indeed it would be impossible to point to any Englishman of that period who was properly qualified for such a task. Butler had died in 1752; and, in the words of Buckle's note-book, "in ecclesiastical literature the most prominent names were Warburton, the bully, and Hurd, the sneak"; which twain had, in the fashion above-noted, sought as was their wont "to labor together in a joint work to do a little good", as Warburton phrased it. The "Remarks" on Hume's work published in the following year by "S. T." were more courteous than Warburton's, but even less cogent.

To a rationalist reader to - day Hume's "Natural History" is not more remarkable for its lucid analysis and downright criticism of the popular anthropomorphic religion of all ages, than for its singular adoption of a system which is only anthropomorphic with a difference. It is, in effect, a demonstration, on the lines of a now established anthropological theory, that all religion had its rise in the attempts of primeval man to explain natural phænomena by personified causes. Hume here, apparently without seeking to rest his assumption on any distinct theoretical basis, adopted the view of those ancients who, though in the dark as to cosmic history, held alike on traditional

and on common-sense grounds that mankind had risen from a state of savagery. Cudworth, writing a hundred years before, brought immense learning to the work of showing that all the non-Christian religions exhibited a degeneration from the monotheistic truth originally revealed to men by the creator; the attempt being motivated, of course, by the belief in creation and revelation with which Cudworth set out. Hume, despite his avowed Deism, must have given up the ordinary doctrine of the creation of man, whatever theory he may have held as to the creation of the world. He offers, however, no hypothesis as to the actual origin of human life; and his notion of the rise of religion would seem thus to rest on an unfixed conception of human beginnings, of which we cannot now even guess the details. It is now pretty clear that Butler's main fulcrum with the thinkers of his day was the inveterate assumption that there must have been at some point of time a positive creation of men and animals. This habitual belief, as it were, tied men down to Deism; and it doubtless operated in the case of Hume. He, however, could never have been convinced by such an argument as Butler's, which, resting the truth of an admittedly perplexing religion on the perplexity of the theistic system of nature, went as far to prove Mohammedanism as to prove Christianity. To say as does Professor Huxley,<sup>1</sup> that "the solid sense of Butler left the Deism of the Freethinkers not a leg to stand upon", is like arguing that if Darwinism could not be fully proved, Genesis must needs be true. Hume argued less rashly. What he appears to have done was to leave his conception of cosmic history in the vague, figuring men to himself as indeed somehow created, but first emerging in trustworthy history as "barbarous, necessitous animals", who framed religious systems conformable to their poor capacities.

From this point, Hume's argument is a process of acute deduction; that is to say, he sees that ignorant savages *must* have been polytheists, and goes on to show how, even after monotheism has been broached, ignorant minds—"the vulgar", as the phrase then ran—will always reduce the "spiritual" notion to an anthropomorphic form, and monotheism to polytheism. Mr. Leslie Stephen has somewhat strangely argued,<sup>2</sup> as against Buckle, that Hume's argument is not deductive inasmuch as it asserts at the outset "the observed fact that monotheism is a recent growth". But in point of fact Hume assumes the inevitableness of primeval polytheism, and goes on to make his historic statement, loosely enough, as part of the proof. The historic proposition is indeed so inaccurate as to imply that Hume at this particular point was temporising, since he must have known the facts were not as he said. "It is a matter of fact incontestable", he writes in the second paragraph of his first section, "that about 1,700 years ago all mankind were polytheists."<sup>1</sup> The doubtful and sceptical principles of *a few philosophers*, or the theism, *and that, too, not entirely pure*, of one or two nations, form no objection worth regarding." Now, all that can be said as to the "impurity" of the monotheism of the ages B.C. applies to the alleged "monotheism" of Christianity itself, as Hume later rather broadly hints; and the "about 1,700 years ago" is thus a blind. The esoteric monotheism even of the Egyptian priesthood, not to speak of the Jewish, was theoretically "purer" than the *quasi*-monotheism of orthodox Christianity, which made

its Deity's tri-personality much more obvious than the unthinkable unity predicated of the Three. Hume's proposition as to the supreme antiquity of polytheism, of course, remained true; but his own argument went to show that the beginning of a widespread and popular but "pure" monotheism might much more reasonably be placed at the date of Mohammed, and still more correctly be assigned to some unknown period in the future. Hume knew very well that in his own country the Deists were not greatly more numerous than the philosophic monotheists of Periclean Greece and Ancient Egypt; and that the reigning faith was polytheistic even in Protestant countries, while in the Catholic it was "idolatrous" as well.

Indeed, the drift of the treatise is only too clearly, for orthodox readers, in the direction of showing that Christianity exemplifies all the laws of religious degeneration seen at work in the faiths of the past. Hume did not write his book merely to show how men constructed foolish creeds in antiquity. The headings of the thirteenth and fourteenth sections originally referred to "most popular religions"; but in later editions the "most" was deleted, leaving no exception in favor of contemporary faith. The passage at the end of section vi, which observes that it is "happily the case with Christianity" to be free from contradiction in its presentment of Deity, is one of Gibbonian irony, the innuendo being a good deal more trenchant than the disclaimer; and several passages explicitly satirise Christian dogma. Thus in the eleventh section the proposition that "all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction", is pointed by a sketch of the course of Christian dogma:

*"Ecclesiastical history sufficiently confirms these reflections. When a controversy is started, some people pretend always with certainty to foretell the issue. Whichever opinion, say they, is most contrary to plain sense, is sure to prevail, even where the general interest of the system requires not that decision. Though the reproach of heresy may, for some time, be bandied about among the disputants, it always rests at last on the side of reason. Anyone, it is pretended, that has but learning enough of this kind to know the definition of Arian, Pelagian, Erastian, Socinian, Sabellian, Eutychian, Nestorian, Monothelite, etc., not to mention Protestant, whose fate is yet uncertain, will be convinced of the truth of this observation. It is thus a system becomes more absurd in the end, merely from its being reasonable and philosophical in the beginning.*

*"To oppose the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble maxims as these—that 'it is impossible for the same to be and not to be', that 'the whole is greater than a part', that 'two and three make five'—is pretending to stop the ocean with a bull-rush. Will you set up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your impiety. And the same fires which were kindled for heretics will serve also for the destruction of philosophers."*

It is not clear why Professor Huxley<sup>1</sup> should speak of this passage as showing "quite unusual acerbity": it is exactly in the ironical tone in which Hume speaks of the absurdities of paganism, a tone much more humorous than bitter. His allusion to the prevailing religion as "superstition", in the well-known passage describing his cheerful attitude towards death, expresses the same temper, always with good humor.

If, then, Hume's "parade of sarcastic respect" to Christianity was certainly ironical, is there any room for surmise that he was glossing his real sentiments in the matter of Deism? After full reflection the answer must be given in a qualified affirmative. The case is well summed up by Professor Huxley:

*"Hume appears to have sincerely accepted the two fundamental conclusions of the argument from design: firstly, that a Deity exists; and, secondly, that he possesses attributes more or less allied to those of human intelligence. But at this embryonic stage of theology, Hume's progress is arrested; and after a survey of the development of dogma, his 'general corollary' is that 'The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment, appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld, did we not enlarge our view, and, opposing one species of superstition to another, set them a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.'*

*"Thus it may fairly be presumed that Hume expresses his own sentiments in the words of the speech with which Philo concludes the "Dialogues" [i.e., Hume's "Dialogues concerning Natural Religion"]:*

*" 'If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication; if it affords no inference that affects human life or can be the source of any action or forbearance; and if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human intelligence, and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: if this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established exceed the objections which lie*

*against it? Some astonishment, indeed, will naturally arise from the greatness of the object; some melancholy from its obscurity; some contempt of human reason, that it can give no solution more satisfactory with regard to so extraordinary and magnificent a question. But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate, or at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes and operations of the divine object of our faith.'*

*"Such being the sum total of Hume's conclusions, it cannot be said that his theological burden is a heavy one. But if we turn from the "Natural History of Religion" to the "Treatise", the "Inquiry", and the "Dialogues", the story of what happened to the ass laden with salt, who took to the water, irresistibly suggests itself. Hume's theism, such as it is, dissolves away in the dialectic river, until nothing is left but the verbal sack in which it was contained."*

This view is borne out by the general conduct of the argument in the "Dialogues." There is there put into the mouth of Philo, the sceptic, the decisive argument that any hypothesis of an "ideal world" such as Berkeley's, only raises a new problem of causation, since every conceived set of phænomena raise the question of cause just as much as any set which they are put forward to explain; and the orthodox or Deistic disputant, Cleanthes, is made only to reply in vacuous rhetoric, which no competent reader can ever have taken as a logical answer.

"Let us remember", says Philo, "the story of the Indian philosopher and his elephant. . . . If the material world rests upon a similar ideal world, this ideal world must rest upon some other, and so on without end. It were better, therefore, never to look beyond the present material world. *By supposing it to contain the principle of its order within itself, we really assert it to be God; and the sooner we arrive at that Divine Being, so much the better. When you go one step beyond the mundane system, you only excite an inquisitive humor which it is impossible ever to satisfy.*"<sup>1</sup>

To which Cleanthes returns a string of windy commonplaces, first surrendering altogether the doctrine of a first cause, then asserting, in a variety of phrases, that "the whole chorus of nature raises one hymn to the praises of its Creator"; and winding up: "You ask me what is the cause of this cause? I know not: I care not; that concerns not me. I have found a Deity, and here I stop my inquiry. Let those go further who are wiser or more enterprising."<sup>2</sup> Hume assuredly did not fancy this amounted to a victory for the idealist. But it is hardly less difficult to suppose, on the other hand, that he did not see that the argument of Philo was as destructive of the doctrine of a personal God



as of that of an "ideal world". The proposition above italicised in Philo's speech is the thesis of Pantheism, between which and Atheism the difference is one of words only. The Atheist says he knows nothing of the "cause" of the universe, and therefore has nothing to say about Deity except that he perceives the idea to be a human invention: the Pantheist asserts that the "cause" is *within* the universe—an unadventurous truism enough, when we agree that "universe" means "everything"—and then proceeds to label the universe "God", without pretending to know anything of the nature of the mystery he has named. "The sooner we arrive at that Divine Being, so much the better." "And", one seems to hear Hume comment, *sotto voce*, "Do not you wish you may get there?" He has, once for all, destroyed his own proposition of an "intelligent author"; since "author" and universe are defined to be one. If it be sought to separate them once more, the checkmate to Cleanthes again comes into play: the predication of a "cause" outside the "universe" is on all fours with the theory of an "ideal world", and simply prompts the questions, (1) What caused that outside cause? (2) And what caused that cause, after an eternity of non-causation, to cause the "universe"? The Theist has no escape from Athanasian self-contradiction; and it is impossible to doubt that Hume saw the collapse of the case when he wrote, in the last section of the "Natural History": "Even the contrarieties of nature, by discovering themselves everywhere, become proofs of some consistent plan, and establish one single purpose or intention, *however inexplicable and incomprehensible*". That is to say, the plan is clearly single and consistent, though it is unintelligible. And as against the professedly confident Theism of the "Natural History", we have in the Dialogues<sup>1</sup> the unanswered dictum of Philo: "There is no view of human life or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes, or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone". Thus when Hume makes all his disputants agree that the dispute is not about the *Being* but the *Nature* of Deity, the former being "self-evident", he is but driving back the Theistic reasoner on the guns of Pantheism = Atheism; for he demonstrates in due course that the *nature* cannot be known. And Being of which we do not know the Nature is simply Existence, which is what the Atheist predicates of the Universe.

The circumstances of the publication of the "Dialogues concerning Natural Religion" go far to prove that, on the one hand, they represent the matured opinions of Hume on religious matters, and that, on the other hand, he knew his arguments went considerably beyond the position taken up in the "Natural History of Religion". He had written the Dialogues years before the publication of the Natural History, and kept them by him for the rest of his life, retouching them with so much care as to make them the most finished of all his compositions. It appears to have been more out of consideration for the feelings of his friends than for his own sake that he did not issue the book in his life-time; but, says his biographer, "after having good-naturedly abstained, for nearly thirty years, from the publication of a work which might give pain and umbrage to his dearest friends; at the close of life, and when the lapse of time since it was written



might have been supposed to render him indifferent to its fate,—because there appeared some danger of its final suppression, he took decided and well-pondered steps to avert from it this fate. Such was the character of the man!<sup>1</sup> The “danger” was that the cautious and deistic Smith, whom Hume had appointed his literary executor with injunctions to publish the “Dialogues”, would evade the task. Hume’s friend Elliott “was opposed to the publication of this work. Blair pleaded strongly for its suppression; and Smith, who had made up his mind that he would not edit the work, seems to have desired that the testamentary injunction laid on him might be revoked.” In May 1776, Hume sent him, “conformably to his desire”, an “ostensible letter” leaving it to Smith’s discretion as executor to delay or abandon the publication of the “Dialogues”, enclosing this in a private letter in which he deprecated Smith’s fears and said: “If I live a few years longer, I shall publish them myself”. Had this arrangement subsisted, the book might never have been published at all, Smith writing later to Strahan that it had been his intention to “carefully preserve” the MS., and leave it at his death to Hume’s family. But by a codicil to his will in August of the same year, Hume left his MSS. to Strahan, his friend and publisher, desiring that the “Dialogues” should be published within two years of his death, but providing that if this were not done the property should return to Hume’s “nephew David, whose duty in publishing them, as the last request of his uncle, must be approved of by all the world”. Strahan in turn, advised by Smith to “consult some prudent friend about what you ought to do”, declined the responsibility; and the book did not appear until in 1779 the nephew fulfilled his uncle’s wish.<sup>1</sup> It is plain that the work was felt all-round to be something more than a deistic treatise, and Hume’s own delay in issuing it shows that he thought it went further than any of his other writings. Indeed in a letter to his friend Elliott in 1751, while professing to “make Cleanthes the hero of the dialogue” he observes that he would be glad of anything that will “strengthen that side of the argument”, and that “any propensity you imagine I have to the other side crept in upon me against my will”; going on to tell how in early youth he had begun uneasily to doubt the soundness of the common opinion, and virtually to hint that theism at times seems to him a case of finding “our own figures in the clouds, our faces in the moon, our passions and sentiments even in inanimate matter”.<sup>2</sup> Elliott of course could not give the help asked; and the “hero of the dialogue” is a heroic failure. Hume never rebutted his own anti-theistic arguments. In the opinion of Professor Huxley, “One can but suspect that . . . his shadowy and inconsistent theism was the expression of his desire to rest in a state of mind which distinctly excluded negation, while it included as little as possible of affirmation, respecting a problem which he felt to be hopelessly impossible”. Here the terms “distinctly excluded negation”, and “as little as possible of affirmation”, seem to me ill-chosen; but the Professor appears to be looking in the right direction for an explanation.

Must we say, then, that when Hume in the “Natural History” professes an unhesitating conventional Theism he was simply dissembling for the sake of his comfort? That would perhaps be a too positive statement of the case; but it seems as if a few qualifications would reduce it to accuracy. The absolute dissimulation may be said to lie in the use of

the ordinary Deistic phrases of "intelligent author", "design", and so forth, which were irreconcilable alike with Hume's Pantheistic logic in the Dialogues and with the scepticism of the "Inquiry Concerning the Human Understanding"; and what we may surmise to have taken place in his mind is the argument that since there is *something* mysterious in the universe, since we cannot but assume a Noumenon for the Phænomena, there is no harm in putting the principle into the phraseology of the most rational of the current popular opinions. It is very much as if Mr. Spencer should call the Unknowable by the name God, by way of getting on pleasantly with Mr. Martineau and Mr. Voysey; only Mr. Spencer has not Hume's reason to apprehend odium for proclaiming Pantheistic or Atheistic principles; and the Theists to-day, as apart from the Trinitarians, have no considerable prestige. In Hume's day, in Edinburgh, it was bad enough to be a Deist: the clergy would have crushed him for that if they could; and only the goodwill earned by his personal charm of character enabled him to secure such a post as that of the keeper of the Advocate's Library in despite of the efforts of the bigots. Had he professed downright Atheism, no personal amiability could have availed to save him from almost general ostracism; the average Deist being commonly found to be only a few degrees less bigoted than the average Christian, when it comes to the handling of professed Atheists. Milton's Arianism never made him diffident on that score. When all is said, however, the fact remains that under grave menace of hardship Hume temporised on religious questions. Not only did he, as we have seen, adopt in the "Natural History" the tone of a Deism which was not his, but in his History of England he inserted for a time a footnote on the "use" and "abuse" of religion, the only effect of which is to suggest an attitude towards supernaturalist tenets which he did not really hold. And, as is well known, he actually prescribed for others a policy of concession to the superstitions of the time, agreeing with Paley in recommending holy orders to a young man who had doubts about the Church's doctrines. As to this, again, we have to remember that in his middle age he had become a commonplace Tory, that is, a Tory by temperament; and that his political bias would of necessity affect his relations to outspoken rationalism in other directions. In fine, he was for his time, intellect apart, a kindly and a conscientious man, being regarded by the thoughtful and rational Adam Smith as "approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit"; and he had probably a great deal more moral courage than certain unclassified critics who to-day accuse him of moral cowardice. But he was certainly not one of the heroes of truth, or of the martyrs of progress. He was a great writer; but the sterner joys of his vocation were not for him.

This said, it remains to do justice to the incomparable insight and lucidity of his philosophical performance. This is not the place to review his system as a whole; but no characterization of Hume can be just which does not take note of the masterliness of his grasp of the fundamental problems of philosophy, and the singular skill of his exposition of every subject on which he laid his hand. In the estimation of a critic of a different school, he is the first master of philosophical English; and it is matter of history that his performance is the turning point of all modern metaphysics. The treatise which follows

is a study rather in psychology than in metaphysics, being indeed one of the first successes of positive philosophy, properly so called, and in effect the foundation of the modern scientific study of religion, having had a large share in priming the French rationalistic work of the Revolutionary period. It has not yet been superseded, because some of its most acute and important suggestions have not yet been systematically applied, as they must one day be, in regard to any one case of religious history. As they stand they are incomplete; and one could wish that Hume had set himself to work out in the concrete the evolution, for instance, of Judaism and Christianity. As a great sociologist has well pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the most luminous exposition of general or abstract truths influences the mass of men much less than an inductive or concrete argument to the same end; and Hume's actual influence, counting by simple numbers, has been small in proportion to his intellectual eminence. He has made far fewer rationalists than Paine. And it would have been very well worth his while to show in detail how far the temper of oriental adulation went to magnify the tribal Yahu into a deity further transformable into the, so to speak, pantheised Spirit of a creed evolved from an older and wider culture.

As it is, however, we have in the "Natural History of Religion" a concise and serviceable account of the origin, growth, and survival of religious notions, which will go further to clear up a beginner's ideas of the nature of past and present religion than any other study of similar length and purpose. That deities are the mere personifications of unknown causes; that untrained minds theologise from particulars and not from generals, and ignore inconsistencies from sheer mental impotence; that ignorance is always tending to turn abstract notions of Deity into concrete, to give its God its own characteristics, and to resort to ignoble propitiations; that religious history is a process of flux and reflux between the refined and the crude conceptions, ignorance now degrading a doctrine, and reason again revolting from the follies of ignorance and seeking to purify its ideas—all this is set forth by Hume with the puissant ease which marks his reflective writing in general. The ostensible drift of the treatise, as we saw, is to make out that whereas ignorant people cannot rightly conceive the power interpenetrating an infinite universe, more cultured people may; but that is a thesis which for any thoughtful reader serves to refute itself. He, at least, who in these days can suppose that the scanty knowledge possible to the wisest of mankind will serve to bridge the gulf between finity and infinitude, is already past all misleading. It is a drawback, again, that the temporising spirit has withheld a plain application of the argument to the beliefs actually current in Europe. But here again the treatise accomplishes more than it says, the reader having but to apply to the faith of his neighbors the propositions of Hume as to the "impious conceptions of the divine nature" and the "bad influence on morality" of the "popular religions". In fine, a "Natural History of Religion", to be worthy of the name, as this is, must be capable of application to the last religion as well as to the first. There is thus secured the gain of a comprehensive and philosophic view.

## Endnotes

[1] The last edited, with an introduction, by Mr. J. M. Wheeler. Freethought Publishing Company.

[1] Warburton's Unpublished Papers, p. 309, cited in Messrs. Green and Grose's ed. of Hume's Works, iii, 61.

[1] Burton's "Life", ii, 35.

[1] "Hume," p. 154.

[2] *Fortnightly Review*, May, 1880, p. 693.

[1] "Idolaters" was the word in the earlier editions, and was probably used without regard to its precise meaning. But Hume recollected that the Persians, and later the Jews, contemned all "idols"; and later substituted the more accurate term. A man might, of course, be an idolater and a monotheist, or a polytheist without idols.

[1] "Hume", p. 142.

[1] Grose and Green's ed. ii, 408.

[2] *Id.*, p. 410.

[1] P. 443.

[1] Burton's "Life", ii, 491.

[1] Burton's "Life", ii., 495.

[2] *Id.* i. 333. See also Huxley's "Hume", p. 147.

[1] Buckle, "History of Civilisation", 3 vol. ed., iii, 461-7.

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## THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION.

As every enquiry which regards religion is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular which challenge our principal attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature. Happily, the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least the

clearest solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflexion, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion. But the other question, concerning the origin of religion in human nature, is exposed to some more difficulty. The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exceptions, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas which it has suggested. Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of Religion, if travellers and historians may be credited; and no two nations, and scarce any two men, have ever agreed precisely in the same sentiments. It would appear, therefore, that this preconception springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature, such as gives rise to self-love, affection between the sexes, love of progeny, gratitude, resentment; since every instinct of this kind has been found absolutely universal in all nations and ages, and has always a precise determinate object, which it inflexibly pursues. The first religious principles must be secondary; such as may easily be perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation too, in some cases, may by an extraordinary concurrence of circumstances be altogether prevented. What those principles are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which direct its operation, is the subject of our present enquiry.

### ***SECTION I. That Polytheism Was The Primary Religion Of Men.***

It appears to me, that if we consider the improvement of human society, from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind. This opinion I shall endeavor to confirm by the following arguments.

It is a matter of fact incontestable, that about 1,700 years ago all mankind were polytheists. The doubtful and sceptical principles of a few philosophers, or the theism, and that too not entirely pure, of one or two nations, form no objection worth regarding. Behold then the clear testimony of history. The farther we mount up into antiquity, the more do we find mankind plunged into polytheism. No marks, no symptoms of any more perfect religion. The most ancient records of the human race still present us with that system as the popular and established creed. The north, the south, the east, the west, give their unanimous testimony to the same fact. What can be opposed to so full an evidence?

As far as writing or history reaches, mankind, in ancient times, appear universally to have been polytheists. Shall we assert, that in more ancient times, before the knowledge of letters, or the discovery of any art or science, men entertained the principles of pure theism? That is, while they were ignorant and barbarous, they discovered truth; but fell into error, as soon as they acquired learn- and politeness.

But in this assertion you not only contradict all appearance of probability, but also our present experience concerning the principles and opinions of barbarous nations. The savage tribes of America, Africa, and Asia, are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule. Insomuch that, were a traveller to transport himself into any unknown region; if he found inhabitants cultivated with arts and sciences, though even upon that supposition there are odds against their being theists, yet could he not safely, till farther inquiry, pronounce any thing on that head: but if he found them ignorant and barbarous, he might beforehand declare them idolaters; and there scarcely is a possibility of his being mistaken.

It seems certain that, according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some grovelling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. We may as reasonably imagine that men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture; as assert that the Deity appeared to them a pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, before he was apprehended to be a powerful, though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs. The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: by abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: and slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity. Nothing could disturb this natural progress of thought, but some obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind into the pure principles of theism, and make it overleap, at one bound, the vast interval which is interposed between the human and the divine nature. But though I allow that the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords such an argument; yet I can never think that this consideration could have an influence on mankind, when they formed their first rude notions of religion.

The causes of such objects as are quite familiar to us, never strike our attention or curiosity; and however extraordinary or surprising these objects in themselves, they are passed over, by the raw and ignorant multitude, without much examination or enquiry. Adam, rising at once in Paradise, and in the full perfection of his faculties, would naturally, as represented by Milton, be astonished at the glorious appearances of nature, the heavens, the air, the earth, his own organs and members; and would be led to ask, whence this wonderful scene arose. But a barbarous, necessitous animal (such as man is on the first origin of society), pressed by such numerous wants and passions, has no leisure to admire the regular face of nature, or make enquiries concerning the

cause of objects to which, from his infancy, he has been gradually accustomed. On the contrary, the more regular and uniform, that is, the more perfect nature appears, the more is he familiarised to it, and the less inclined to scrutinise and examine it. A monstrous birth excites his curiosity, and is deemed a prodigy. It alarms him from its novelty; and immediately sets him a-trembling, and sacrificing, and praying. But an animal complete in all its limbs and organs, is to him an ordinary spectacle, and produces no religious opinion or affection. Ask him, whence that animal arose; he will tell you, from the copulation of its parents. And these, whence? From the copulation of theirs. A few removes satisfy his curiosity, and set the objects at such a distance, that he entirely loses sight of them. Imagine not that he will so much as start the question, whence the first animal; much less, whence the whole system or united fabric of the universe arose. Or, if you start such a question to him, expect not that he will employ his mind with any anxiety about a subject so remote, so uninteresting, and which so much exceeds the bounds of his capacity.

But farther, if men were at first led into the belief of one superior Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief, in order to embrace polytheism; but the same principles of reason which at first produced and diffused over mankind so magnificent an opinion, must be able, with greater facility, to preserve it. The first invention and proof of any doctrine is much more difficult than the supporting and retaining of it.

There is a great difference between historical facts and speculative opinions; nor is the knowledge of the one propagated in the same manner with that of the other. An historical fact, while it passes by oral tradition from eye-witnesses and contemporaries, is disguised in every successive narration, and may at last retain but very small, if any, resemblance of the original truth on which it was founded. The frail memories of men, their love of exaggeration, their supine carelessness; these principles, if not corrected by books and writing, soon pervert the account of historical events, where argument or reasoning has little or no place, nor can ever recal the truth which has once escaped those narrations. It is thus the fables of Hercules, Theseus, Bacchus, are supposed to have been originally founded in true history, corrupted by tradition. But with regard to speculative opinions, the case is far otherwise. If these opinions be founded in arguments so clear and obvious as to carry conviction with the generality of mankind, the same arguments which at first diffused the opinions will still preserve them in their original purity. If the arguments be more abstruse, and more remote from vulgar apprehension, the opinions will always be confined to a few persons; and as soon as men leave the contemplation of the arguments, the opinions will immediately be lost and be buried in oblivion. Whichever side of this dilemma we take, it must appear impossible that theism could, from reasoning, have been the primary religion of human race, and have afterwards, by its corruption, given birth to polytheism and to all the various superstitions of the heathen world. Reason, when obvious, prevents these corruptions: when abstruse, it keeps the principles entirely from the knowledge of the



vulgar, who are alone liable to corrupt any principle or opinion.

## ***SECTION II. Origin Of Polytheism.***

If we would, therefore, indulge our curiosity, in enquiring concerning the origin of religion, we must turn our thoughts towards polytheism, the primitive religion of uninstructed mankind.

Were men led into the apprehension of invisible, intelligent power, by a contemplation of the works of nature, they could never possibly entertain any conception but of one single being, who bestowed existence and order on this vast machine, and adjusted all its parts, according to one regular plan or connected system. For though, to persons of a certain turn of mind, it may not appear altogether absurd that several independent beings, endowed with superior wisdom, might conspire in the contrivance and execution of one regular plan: yet is this a merely arbitrary supposition, which, even if allowed possible, must be confessed neither to be supported by probability nor necessity. All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Everything is adjusted to everything. One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author; because the conception of different authors, without any distinction of attributes or operations, serves only to give perplexity to the imagination, without bestowing any satisfaction on the understanding. The statue of Laocoon, as we learn from Pliny, was the work of three artists: but it is certain that, were we not told so, we should never have imagined that a group of figures, cut from one stone, and united in one plan, was not the work and contrivance of one statuary. To ascribe any single effect to the combination of several causes, is not surely a natural and obvious supposition.

On the other hand, if, leaving the works of nature, we trace the footsteps of invisible power in the various and contrary events of human life, we are necessarily led into polytheism, and to the acknowledgment of several limited and imperfect deities. Storms and tempests ruin what is nourished by the sun. The sun destroys what is fostered by the moisture of dews and rains. War may be favorable to a nation whom the inclemency of the seasons afflicts with famine. Sickness and pestilence may depopulate a kingdom, amidst the most profuse plenty. The same nation is not, at the same time, equally successful by sea and land. And a nation which now triumphs over its enemies, may anon submit to their more prosperous arms. In short, the conduct of events, or what we call the plan of a particular providence, is so full of variety and uncertainty, that, if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions, a constant combat of opposite powers, and a repentance or change of intention in the same power, from impotence or levity. Each nation has its tutelar deity. Each element is subto its invisible power or agent. The province of each god is separate from that of another. Nor are the operations of the same god always certain and invariable. To-day he protects: to-morrow he abandons

us. Prayers and sacrifices, rites and ceremonies, well or ill performed, are the sources of his favor or enmity, and produce all the good or ill fortune which are to be found amongst mankind.

We may conclude, therefore, that in all nations which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose, not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind. Accordingly we find that all idolaters, having separated the provinces of their deities, have recourse to that invisible agent to whose authority they are immediately subjected, and whose province it is to superintend that course of actions in which they are at any time engaged. Juno is invoked at marriages; Lucina at births. Neptune receives the prayers of seamen; and Mars of warriors. The husbandman cultivates his field under the protection of Ceres; and the merchant acknowledges the authority of Mercury. Each natural event is supposed to be governed by some intelligent agent; and nothing prosperous or adverse can happen in life, which may not be the subject of peculiar prayers or thanksgivings.<sup>1</sup>

It must necessarily, indeed, be allowed, that in order to carry men's attention beyond the present course of things, or lead them into any inference concerning invisible intelligent power, they must be actuated by some passion which prompts their thought and reflection; some motive which urges their first inquiry. But what passion shall we here have recourse to, for explaining an effect of such mighty consequence? Not speculative curiosity surely, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross apprehensions, and would lead men into inquiries concerning the frame of nature; a subject too large and comprehensive for their narrow capacities. No passions, therefore, can be supposed to work upon such barbarians, but the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinise, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

### ***SECTION III. The Same Subject Continued.***

We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely unknown to us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent, those ills with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want, which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These *unknown causes*, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally

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